



Helping Low-Income Students Prepare to Succeed in College

Many of America's talented young people end their formal education at high school. For them, the opportunity to progress to college is not apparent. This is due to a number of factors including:

- *Low expectations*
- *Low motivation*
- *Lack of appropriate curriculum, instruction, and support*
- *The absence of information that clearly delineates available educational options and opportunities*

Although this problem cuts across all income levels it is particularly acute for the nation's poor. Today, a third of middle income students with average test scores *do not* attend college. In looking at lower income levels, high academic achievers from low-income families are five times less likely to attend college than their more economically advantaged peers.

The Challenge:

To bolster America's long-term prosperity by empowering students from lower income levels to overcome obstacles inherent in the current educational system that prevent academic success beyond high school.

The reasons for this are myriad.

Too many of this nation's economically disadvantaged children do not receive sufficient encouragement to strive for college and are not enlightened early enough to consider continuing beyond high school. As a result, they do not plan for college and fail to enroll in secondary school courses needed for college entry. For those who do take the right courses, however, the kinds of extra support they may need to succeed academically are often unavailable. Moreover, as studies show, the parents of these same students seldom feel that they possess the information to encourage and guide their children toward post-secondary education. They need and want more information about college preparatory and advanced placement courses as well as the cost of college and how they can afford to pay for it. Without this information they are at a loss to encourage and guide their children toward a college education. *The result is that unlike their more advantaged peers, whether children from low-income families get the right information and encouragement, take the right courses and get the help they need to succeed is too often left to happenstance rather than design.* This situation is not only inherently unfair and a waste of young talent, but also a threat to the nation's long-term prosperity. For it is through the knowledge and skills of its citizens and by extension the long-term educational attainment of all of its children, that a nation realizes its future.

In recognition of the need to provide a true opportunity to a quality education that all children deserve, GEAR UP was signed into law as part of the Higher Education Amendments of 1998 (Public Law 105-244). GEAR UP is designed to



enable more young Americans to stay in school, study hard, and take the right courses to succeed in college. It is aimed at enabling low-income communities and States to create new or expanded plans that strengthen their schools and provide educational opportunities for low-income students. Based upon proven models, GEAR UP includes local schools, community-based organizations, private industry, institutions of higher education, and States to work in partnerships to help students and their parents gain needed knowledge, and strengthen academic programs in their schools. Through GEAR UP, the U.S. Department of Education

addresses the challenge to help more low-income students become prepared academically and financially to enter into and succeed in college.

The Response Must Address Need, Effective Strategies, And Commitment

Grants awarded under this initiative will support local partnerships and State efforts to develop or expand comprehensive programs that provide the opportunities, support, and information low-income students need to have high expectations, stay in school, study hard, and succeed in college. Every school -- large or small, urban, suburban or rural -- in the country has the responsibility to provide a quality education for all students, rich or poor.

GEAR UP partnerships are designed to understand and address the needs of their disadvantaged communities and implement effective systemic reform to ensure that all students are prepared to succeed in college. The partnerships must sustain long-term systemic reform that meets the academic and college preparation needs of an entire cohort of students rather than the more traditional pull-out program that only assists selected students.

The Response:

Partnerships that sustain long-term systemic reform to meet the academic and college preparation needs of an entire cohort of students rather than the more traditional pull-out programs that only assist selected students.

To insure that low-income students have the opportunities, support and information they need to succeed in college, GEAR UP partnerships must develop responses to three demands: **Need; Effective Strategies, and Commitment.**

NEED: Students from low-income families have low rates of academic success and low-levels of academic attainment relative to their more advantaged peers. This is particularly true of students who attend schools where the majority of their classmates come from equally modest circumstances. In contrast, low-income students attending schools where the majority of students are more advantaged, record higher levels of achievement and attainment than low-income students enrolled in schools where poverty is pervasive. Put simply, poverty has the most negative impact where it is the most concentrated. If we are to meet the challenge of helping more low-income students prepare for college, we must concentrate on those neighborhood schools within communities of high financial need.

Of course, even in some of this nation's poorest communities there are schools that manage to produce students with the academic achievement and educational attainment comparable to those found in more affluent areas. These schools -- staffed by well-prepared and committed individuals -- have been particularly successful in mitigating the negative effects of poverty on young minds. They have done so, by first carefully assessing the academic, social, and support needs of students and the concomitant programmatic needs and gaps in services that prevent students from being successful. If we hope to help more low-income students succeed, the first thing we must do is look within schools and to their communities to identify what must be changed and improved so that every student can achieve academically and be prepared to succeed in college.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES: Figuring out what the needs and gaps in services are, is only a start. Delineating and initiating strategies to address those needs is at the heart of meeting the challenge. For example, although taking algebra by the eighth or ninth grade is a gateway to additional mathematics college preparatory courses, only 15% of low-income students enroll in algebra by the eighth grade. This despite the fact that those low-income students who do take algebra and geometry are almost three times more likely to attend college than those students who do not. Getting low-income students to take algebra by the eighth or ninth grade, therefore, is a worthy goal. However, meeting the need to improve students' basic mathematics skills will likely be a precursor to taking and successfully completing an algebra course.

Implementing effective strategies and providing appropriate services to prepare students to take algebra and achieve a high degree of literacy is essential to a successful GEAR UP program. What is necessary to achieve these goals? Will it require:

- *Curricular changes?*
- *Upgraded teacher professional development?*
- *Smaller classes with more targeted instruction?*
- *One-on-one tutoring?*
- *Saturday academies?*
- *Summer Institutes?*

All of the above and more will be required.

As another example, the parents of these students may have no clear idea of how one prepares for college or the existence of available financial assistance to offset the expense of higher education. In a recent Gallup poll, 70% of parents indicated that they have little information, or need more information, about which courses their child should take to prepare for college, and 89% want more information regarding how to pay for college. Yet, this kind of knowledge is vital if parents are to serve as effective academic mentors for their children. Clearly, here is a need that must be met because it impacts the expectations and aspirations that low-income parents have for their children. In addressing this need, some questions that arise may be “what strategies best engage parents in the education of their children?” Or, “in what forms and in what ways should needed knowledge be conveyed so that parents may serve as effective educational mentors and partners in their children’s long term educational goals?”

These are the kinds of issues that must be addressed in a successful GEAR UP program. To meet the challenge, therefore, the response must be systemic if more low-income students are to realize the potential that lies within each of them. **In short, how exactly can the needs of students and required changes in schooling be tied to strategies that ensure that needs are met and programmatic gaps are filled?**

COMMITMENT: The importance of linking college awareness and preparation to success in college is not new. We have known for some time that such programs can be successful. Students who participate in high-quality college awareness programs and strengthen their academic preparation attend college at a higher rate than those who do not.

What sets GEAR UP apart from the other programs?

- ✓ **First**, GEAR UP reflects the call by hundreds of college presidents and scores of community organizations for a new national ethic that all colleges should partner with low-income, middle grade schools in order to help prepare the children of our nation for college. If we, as a nation, truly value education, those who have experienced college must help our young people get on the right path to college and success.
- ✓ **Second**, GEAR UP provides for a long-term early intervention that will enable students and families to learn about and plan for college over a period of *years*. We must reach students – and their parents – far earlier, and in far greater numbers, with accurate information about the demands and expectations of college, both academic and financial.
- ✓ **Third**, GEAR UP uses a different, more systemic approach that involves students and families, K-12 schools, colleges and community-based groups. The lack of experience with college -- not just within families but within entire neighborhoods – has meant that piecemeal and pullout programs have reached only a fraction of the population.

GEAR UP programs will provide college awareness services, including mentoring, academic course counseling and financial aid information as well as strengthen the instruction and course offerings in participating middle and high schools. These services must be provided during as well as outside the school day. This is what must be done if we are to help more low-income students prepare for college. GEAR UP programs are designed to meet this challenge.

This kind of vision calls for commitment on the part of all involved – educators, parents, students, partners, and states. It also calls for a commitment to continue the program beyond the federal support that initiates it lest it die after the funding runs out. Commitment of this sort requires resources, of course, but it is sustained on success both incremental and long-term. Commitment to careful planning, proper implementation, effective partnerships, communication, constant monitoring of progress, and dedication to a continuous improvement model are the essentials of GEAR UP. ensure such success. And success in these terms is absolutely vital if we are to meet the challenge to give low-income students high expectations, have them stay in school, study hard, and succeed in college.

The Strategy:

- ✓ Careful planning
- ✓ Proper implementation
- ✓ Effective partnerships
- ✓ Communication
- ✓ Monitoring performance
- ✓ Dedication to a continuous improvement